

Best Story Challenge



The cover of the January 2008 issue of "The Combat EDGE" magazine. The title "The Combat EDGE" is at the top in large gold letters, with a yellow triangle pointing right integrated into the letter "E". Below the title is a black and white photograph of a person's silhouette standing on the wing of an aircraft against a bright sky. The subtitle "NOCTURNAL Tiger Sharks" is prominently displayed in the center. A small blurb reads: "In our last issue, we talked about the night fighter mission at Langley Air Force Base in northern Virginia. Those of you who have been there will know that Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) located outside the perimeter wall bring about a few surprises...our thanks to Beck?" At the bottom left is a snippet of an article with the first few paragraphs visible. At the bottom right is the text "Check out operations requires a lot of teamwork..." followed by "HQ ACC/SEM" and "LANGLEY AFB VA".



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NOCTURNAL Tiger Sharks

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It was a standard moonless night at Bagram Air Base in northern Afghanistan. Those of you who have been there or to similar Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) know exactly what we're talking about. It was dark. How dark you ask?

You wouldn't see General Francis if he walked 2 miles in front of you. In fact, you wouldn't have known anyone was there. Marching orders from the Army bases were crystal clear: nighttime operations would be conducted under blacked-out conditions. Consequently, the 70th Fighter Squadron Tiger Sharks faced a dilemma; the leadership knew they could not fly at night due to lack of blacked-out operational training or to formally develop a safe, logically developed Operational Risk Management (ORM) plan to provide the Combined Force Air Component Commander with the A-10's one-of-a-kind strike capability 24 hours a day. That decision was easy. The next ahead would require a total team effort from the squadron.

First Things First

The first obstacle facing the Tiger Sharks was the stark fact that no one in the squadron had ever

completed a Night-Vision Goggle (NVG) takeoff or landing. This completed initial ground training consisting of reviewing both the *Fighter AAF Pilot-Light Tiger Review* and the *A-10 Test Evaluation Squadron's (TEB) Transition of NVG Takeoff and Landing Operations*. Additionally, the 422 TEB provided platform instruction and techniques at Pope AFB immediately prior to the Tiger Sharks' departure to their Areas of Responsibility (AOR). Once in theater, the Tiger Sharks honedpicked their meet experienced NVG Instructor Pilots (IPs) to develop Bagram-specific NVG takeoff and landing procedures. Pilots flew their initial night sorties at Bagram with an NVG IP, utilizing a building block approach. Upgrading pilots would fly their first-ever NVG approach to a low approach, then make a full-stop landing on their second attempt. After several weeks of training, the

squadron became NVG takeoff and landing capable.

Blocked-Out Environment

Bagram nighttime operations forced the Tiger Sharks to face numerous wartime challenges never experienced in day-to-day training. For instance, prior to the pilot's arrival, maintenance troops, weapons leaders, and crew chiefs had to prepare the A-10s using illumination from only blue chem-sticks and red-lensed miniature flashlights. Accustomed to working under massive "football stadium" floodlights at Pope, crews quickly and safely adjusted their procedures to the unfriendly nighttime environment. The prevention of Foreign Object Damage (FOD) became a huge priority. Items that were normally double-checked on a daily basis were now triple- or

Blackout operations require a total team effort ...



weapons fashioned red lense covers for their jammers ...

ever quadruple-checked for accountability. Marshalls would place their flashlight wands and instead used blue chem-sticks to convey their red instructions to pilots. As an extra safety precaution, spotters became designated safety observers for launch and recovery. Equipped with a set of NVGs, expeditors made certain that combat operations were conducted in a safe manner.

To minimize nighttime maintenance, aircraft were rotated based on each day's tasking; however, eliminating nighttime maintenance altogether was not an option. Weapons troops fashioned lances for jammers and other support vehicles from cardboard, cut tape, and red plastic. Spotters were used to transport munitions and stores

from storage areas to the flightline when equipment could not be pre-positioned prior to sunset. Spotters waited in front of raw vehicles and ensured the path ahead was clear.

Cleared to Tax

Tiger Shark pilots required blocked-out transportation from the Air Force compound at Bagram to the flightline and this task fell to the 75th Fighter Squadron Life Support shop. Driving at night is difficult. Driving at night at Bagram in the dust, overcrowded, cramped flightline environment proved to be an insurance agents worst nightmare. Donor-stroking American ingenuity at its best, life support personnel rigged up a set of spare NVGs and attached them to a mounting

bracelet — this somewhat crudely fashioned rig provided life support troops the wherewithal to complete more than 600 runs over a 4-month period, all without a single incident. Eventually, the life support shop received their own monocular NVGs which provided them with a true user-friendly NVG capability.

The initial cadre of life support personnel ensured continued success by training follow-on troops in their job taught out of blocked-out flightline driving.

Transporting Pilots

Upon arrival at the jets, walk arounds and flight control checks had to be accomplished in near pitch-black conditions. As aircraft prepared to taxi, every available body on the flightline placed IR chem-lights

on the edges of the taxway to aid the pilots in maneuvering his aircraft from the cramped parking area. Using these whomobiles and the A-10's IR tac light pilots taxied along the narrow taxways to the arming area. It was vitally important to stay on the taxway, it for no other reason than the close proximity of Soviet-led minesfields. Once aircraft made it safely to the arming area, weapons troops loaded and curled over 30mm munition lines, ensuring that each weapon would function properly.

"Cleared for Takeoff"

After final safety check pilots taxied their armored A-10s off to takeoff position on a 180 foot wide slab of packed concrete they referred to as a runway. Unfortunately, only 90 feet of the runway width was usable [usable = the length this you'd ever want to experience in a fighter aircraft]. Once cleared for takeoff, pilots used their NVGs to clear for obstructions and enemy activity as they raced down the runway toward the darkness beyond the IR runway lights. It was dark even with the NVGs on; it was even darker without them. The use of NVGs at Bagram made takeoffs of night sorties and more importantly made landings at night possible.

After flying a combat mission and landing safely, the Tiger Shark team reversed the launch sequence and made sure aircraft made it safely back to parking. As the ground drivers picked up pilots, maintenance troops began preparing aircraft for their next mission. As the sky above the mountains east of Bagram began to glow with the coming of a new dawn, the nocturnal Tiger Sharks put away their NVGs and returned to their tents, secure in the knowledge that they had saved countless American and coalition lives.

Thoughts

The challenges of NVG operations in a blocked-out base-area would mean many trials for the Tiger Sharks and their Air Force. In fact, prior to operations at Bagram Air Base, NVG takeoffs and landings in an A-10 had only been accomplished 7 years previous by the 422 TFS, and then only under ideal testing conditions. The 75th Fighter Squadron experienced at Bagram demonstrated that ORV is a force enabler. The Tiger Sharks found a way to perform an extremely difficult combat task early with a safe barrier-blank approach. While recognizing the inherent hazards of NVG operations, airbase personnel mitigated the risks around them by learning to walk before they tent.

Ground troops in the surrounding areas depended on the Tiger Sharks to make the Close Air Support (CAS) mission happen. To do the Tiger Sharks performed technically demanding and extremely dangerous grand maneuvers. In theater for more than 100 days, the Tiger Sharks did not miss a single tasking and flew 700 combat sorties while maintaining a 96.1 percent mission capable rate. Applying communication, ORV kept Diagram operations as covert and safe as possible while providing real time CAS airpower to ground forces in dangerous.



Nocturnal Tiger Sharks

- Operational
 - Enduring Freedom
 - Deployed Operation
 - Timely



Nocturnal Tiger Sharks

- Covers All Aspects of Safety
 - Ground
 - Weapons
 - Flight



Nocturnal Tiger Sharks

- Photography
 - Matches Story
 - Good Quality



Nocturnal Tiger Sharks

- Didn't have to beg to get it



Where the few do more with less!
(No Budget, No Support, No Problem!)

